Plays That Scored and Plays That Bored During the Past Season

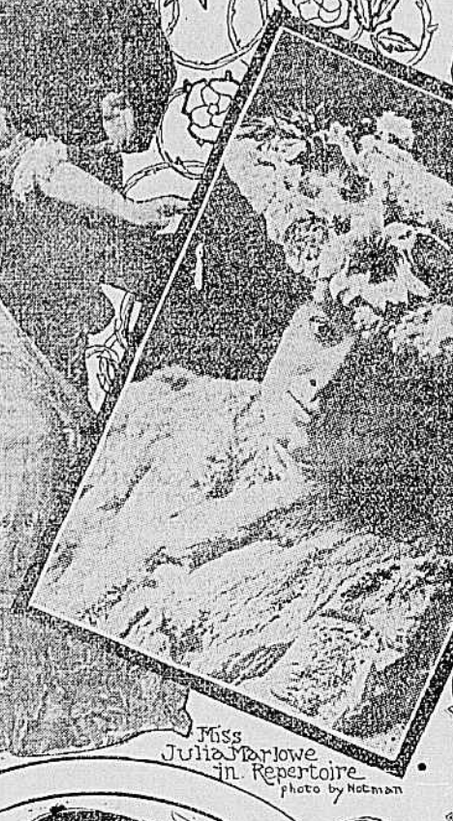
Miss Frances Starr "The Rose of the Rancho" photo by Selby

Miss Ethel Barrymore, in "His Excellency the Governor" photo by Sarony

Miss Eleanor Robson in "Salomy Jane" photo by Sarony

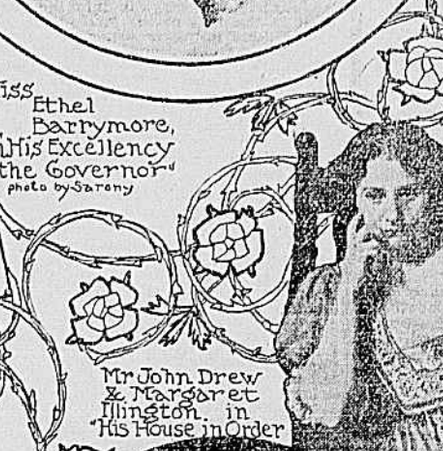
Mme Nazimova in "Comtesse Coquette" photo by Hallen

Miss Ellen Terry in Repertoire photo by Sarony



Miss Julia Marlowe in Repertoire photo by Notman

Miss Hattie Williams in the Little Cherub Photo by Otto Sarony Co



Mr John Drew & Margaret Illington in "His House in Order"

Miss Nance O'Neil in "Cleo"

Mr Ermete Novelli, Will Return to America Next Season. photo by Sarony

BY GEORGE HENRY PAYNE.

New York, May 11, 1907.

ONE could hardly ask for a more sensational end of the season than the announcement that the Big and the Little Syndicates have come together to do business hereafter with all the weapons of war under lock and key. As a climax to a busy theatrical season one could hardly ask for anything more astonishing, for there is not a part of the country that has not been worked up over the question as to whether it was to receive syndicate or anti-syndicate attractions, and the activity of the Shuberts in building new theatres, not to speak of Mr. Belasco's and Mr. Fiske's more vehement warfare, has advertised pretty throughly the battle that was being waged, with Forty-second street as its headquarters.

It is too early yet to say just what the result of this new company, in which both Lee Shubert and Klaw & Erlanger are officers, will be, but there is very little chance of its affecting the productions of next season, as it is avowedly for the purpose of doing only the vaudeville business.

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Looking over the past season, the most encouraging feature as regards the theatre has been the number of productions of new plays by young American authors. No important new man has come to the front except William Dwight Moody, whose play, "The Great Divide," with Margaret Anglin and Henry Miller as co-stars, has filled the Princess Theatre for the entire season. An interesting play in many ways, "The Great Divide" is not by any means a remarkable specimen of the American drama. There are interesting moments in it, but the thesis is small, and in the big, broad Western setting that the author has chosen, his human struggle seems petty and more calculated to interest the New England spinster than the class of public that is ordinarily attracted by what has come to be known as the Western drama.

Next to Mr. Moody's play the most successful play by an American author offered this season was Mr. Broadhurst's "Man of the Hour," which filled the Savoy Theatre from the night it opened and promises to run there all summer. No better time could have been chosen for a political play dealing with graft and corruption, and the answer of the public to it has been almost unanimous. In a way the play is supposed to typify New York conditions, but these conditions are general in American cities, and the play will undoubtedly have the same great success throughout the country that it has had here. The strength of the play is its delineation of political characters as we know them—the boss and his henchman—while the weakness of the play is its love story and the very conventional feminine portraiture.

As one might expect, Mr. Belasco's production of the season, "The Rose of the Rancho," is one of the most popular plays of the year. It is a charming story of California and magnificently staged. With it New York learned of a new star—a mere slip of a girl, who has magnetism and intelligence, beauty and no little ability as an actress. If Miss Frances Starr does nothing but "The Rose of the Rancho" she will still have earned for herself a very enviable reputation.

Paul Armstrong, who has not been heard from since his successful "Heir to the Hoorah," came forward this season with a very virile play, in atmosphere and characterization the strongest play offered by an American author this season—"Salomy Jane." The play is based on Bret Harte's story, "Salomy Jane's Kiss." While Miss Eleanor Robson appears in it to great advantage, a more robust temperament would seem to more completely fill the author's idea.

In "Brewster's Millions," the dramatization of Mr. McCutcheon's story, "Winchell Smith," New York came to know for the first time Mr. Fred Thompson, of Hippodrome fame, as a thirty-third degree manager. The play is light entertainment, furnishing considerable amusement, and in the third act a remarkable picture of a yacht at sea in a storm is probably the most striking thing that Mr. Thompson's mechanical genius has devised, and certainly unparalelled among mechanical stage inventions.

William Collier, appearing both as author and actor in his play, "Caught in the Rain," makes the sixth play to fill the theatre in which it is offered from the day of its production. Really an amusing farce, "Caught in the Rain" is Collieresque from the start to the finish.

Not distinguished by long runs, but notable in other ways, were Mr. William Gillette's "Clarice" and Langdon Mitchell's "The New York Idea." Mr. Gillette in his new play (new to New York; it has been seen throughout the country) pictured a consumptive who chooses to commit suicide under the erroneous impression that his death is imminent. There was much cleverness in the construction and some of the smaller scenes, but the actor had overelaborated the part he played himself, and the play failed to grip.

"The New York Idea" ought to prove a popular title on the road, where the impression is that most New Yorkers spend their time getting in or out of a divorce. Scintillating comedy Mr. Mitchell has made for Mrs. Fiske, but it was just a trifle too smart. More brilliant dialogue one rarely listens to on the stage, but the author has sacrificed solidarity to brilliancy, and, while the play was intensely amusing, it was also very suggestive of the Oscar Wilde school of drama.

A year ago the dramatist who was most talked of in this country was Mr. Charles Klein, who, out of "The Lion and the Mouse" and "The Music Master," was said to be making something like $3,000 a week. Naturally his new play was looked forward to with great interest, but "The Daughters of Men" failed to catch the public as "The Lion and the Mouse" did, and rather emphasized the contention of those who believed that "The Lion and the Mouse," despite its great popular success, was a very bad play. That play completed its run of six hundred nights only a few weeks ago and is still the subject of discussion among people interested in the theatre, no two persons seeming to agree as to why it lasted as long as it did. That it came at a time when the public was ripe for some theatrical assault or exposure of the capitalist undoubtedly helped. The impersonation of Mr. Edmund Breese of the part of John D. Raynor was another very strong factor.

One of the curious features of the season was that there was no new play from the man who has undoubtedly written the greatest of American dramas, Mr. Augustus Thomas. Next season, however, we are to have two plays, one said to be a powerfully built drama on the subject of hypnotism, and by the author's friends declared to be a greater play than even his "Arizona," "Alabama" or "In Mizzoura." The other play, in which Mr. Dustin Farnum will star, is in a measure a return to what has been called the "State plays" of Mr. Thomas, being a picture of Mexico, the result of a winter's sojourn and study in that country.

Only a few years ago it was customary to associate Mr. Clyde Fitch with Mr. Thomas as the two leading American dramatists. Mr. Fitch's plays have continued to have a certain vogue, though there has been a steadily increasing depreciation. The climax came this season when Mr. Fitch turned out four plays and the public turned every one of them down. His dramatization of Mrs. Wharton's "House of Mirth" ran one week, and his "Girl Who Had Everything," with Miss Robson as the star, filled a brief engagement at the Liberty, while the town amused itself with many suggestions to the effect that the "Girl Who Had Everything" might find it necessary to divide with Mr. Fitch if he continued to turn out plays of that calibre.

On February 10 Mr. Fitch produced two plays at different theatres and responded to the call for "author" at both theatres—the Criterion and the Astor. "The Straight Road," written for Miss Blanche Walsh, was roundly condemned for its vulgarity, while "The Truth" (with Mrs. Clara Bloodgood) suffered greatly from the author's inability to understand that the American husband does not take it as a matter of course, or as a joke, that a young good-for-nothing should endeavor to effect a liaison with his wife.

The success of Mr. Fitch in the past has had its bad effect in that some of the younger American dramatists have observed too closely the methods by which he has won public favor. Clever Mr. Fitch is undoubtedly, but it is an episodic cleverness, a tricky cleverness. Caricature is substituted for characterization, and when he touches the emotional it is impossible not to feel that he has his tongue in his cheek.

One of the biggest successes of the year has been Mr. James Forbes' "The Chorus Lady," and this is one of the plays that I would characterize as displaying the Fitch influence. The first act is really good, but after that the author uses all the Fitch tricks and the play sways between melodrama and horseplay. The main character, Patricia O'Brien, is supposed to be the slangy chorus girl, and here is the germ of a good dramatic idea. But in order to get "laughs" the author has stuffed his character with slangy "sayings" almost to the point of boredom.

Another clever play that suffered from the same influence was "Clothes," by Messrs. Pollock and Hapwood. Mr. Pollock is undoubtedly a coming dramatist, and up to now there has been evidence of a fine virile point of view. But whether it was the title or an obsession produced by writing on so essentially a feminine topic, this play suggested Fitch too often for its good.

From the English authors, usually our prolific producers, we have had but two plays that were successful—"His House in Order," by Arthur W. Pinero, and "The Hypocrites," by Henry Arthur Jones. "His House in Order" is really a great play, pick flaws in it as one will. In the opinion of the writer it is one of the greatest plays that the author has written, and in an interesting talk with the author last summer at his home in London one might deduce that Mr. Pinero himself is inclined to look at it as his "golden haired child." The production here was in the principals better than that which I saw in London. Never has Mr. John Drew been more sincere and more effective, and Miss Margaret Illington in one night placed herself among American actresses of whom one may expect great things. "The Hypocrites" of Mr. Jones was a lugubrious effort, probably written ten years ago, for it reeked with the old "sex against sex" battle that interested the didactic dramatists of a decade ago.

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New York has not lost its interest in George Bernard Shaw, and this season three of his plays hitherto unproduced in this country were offered to the public with but little success. Mr. Forbes Robertson achieved little less than an artistic triumph in "Caesar and Cleopatra," but it is doubtful if the play would have had the run that it did if it were not for that actor's interesting personality and striking ability. "Widowers' Houses" was produced at a series of matinees and proved to be the least interesting of the Shaw plays that we have seen. Miss Ellen Terry opened her tour in this country with "Captain Brassbound's Conversion," and again the audiences were listless. This was followed shortly after by a revival of "Mrs. Warren's Profession," which, over a year ago, had one performance in New York, the police—it will be remembered—stepping in and closing the theatre. As the writer contended then, the police were not necessary; the public itself would have closed the theatre in very little time if such a hubbub had not been made over the play. The crime of the play is not so much the open discussion of harlotry as it is Mr. Shaw's insincerity—his inability to be serious when drawing a tragic subject—his great artistic error in making laughable that which to every right thinking person is a matter of tears.

What would a theatrical season in New York be without its quota of that peculiar form of entertainment that was once known as comic opera, but has more recently become "the musical melange," "the musical cocktail," "the musical fantasy," &c., &c.? The public has grown a bit tired of having the theatrical reporter hark back to the days of Gilbert and Sullivan, but for generations to come that combination of librettist and composer is bound to remain an ideal, an idol and idyll.

There are eighty-two reasons why we have not librettos that are worthy of the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition. One will suffice. The man who can write a good libretto is able to write a good play, and he sees no particular reason why he should divide the royalties with a composer.

One man has appeared on the field who has shown that he has the ability of the dramatist allied to the willingness to be a librettist. That man is Henry Blossom, whose "Mlle. Modiste" last year and whose "Red Mill" this year are both distinct advances in the field of the comic opera "book." Blossom has ideas, he has a sense of the dramatic, and, weird and wonderful thing in modern comic opera, he has a sense of characterization. Somehow or another, by some strange sleight of hand, he succeeds in getting into his librettos a line here and there that makes you feel that his characters are human, have some history and being, and are not the mere puppets of the stage marked "tenor," "barytone," "contralto"—"STAR."

No play, operatic or otherwise, has been as successful this year as "The Red Mill" of Henry Blossom and Victor Herbert. It is hardly necessary to speak of the music of Victor Herbert—that can always be counted on to be fresh, tuneful and scholarly. Much as we like and respect Herbert, I do not think we quite appreciate what a master he is of the humorous in music. Mozart would have been fond of Herbert had he known him, but Mozart had many misfortunes. This was one of them—he did not know Herbert.

It would be unjust not to say that a great measure of "The Red Mill's" success was due to Montgomery and Stone, who appear for the first time in "straight parts" after their long career in the odd "make-up" of "The Wizard of Oz."

Other successful "musical shows" were Hattie Williams, in "The Little Cherub;" Anna Held, in "The Parisian Model;" Sam Bernard, in "The Rich Mr. Hoggenheimer," and Eddie Foy, in "The Orchid."

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Farewell to the season for several distinguished actors means farewell to the stage this year. Joe Weber says he will retire, Edna May has already said "Goodby," and that charming comedienne, Fay Templeton, announces that this year is her last. 'Tis a strange world. When a woman marries she quits the field of labor—artistic or otherwise. When a man marries—but this discussion is not properly in the domain of either entertainment or amusement.

TEN MOST SUCCESSFUL PLAYS OF THE YEAR.

Play.	Author.	Manager.	Star or Featured Performer.	Length of Run.
The Hypocrites	Henry Arthur Jones	Charles Frohman	Miss Jessie Millward	28 weeks.
His House in Order	A. W. Pinero	Charles Frohman	John Drew	16 weeks.
The Chorus Lady	James Forbes	W. B. Harris	Rose Stahl	Entire season.
The Great Divide	W. D. Moody	Henry Miller	Margaret Anglin	Entire season.
Brewster's Millions	Quigley and Smith	Frederic Thompson	Edward Abeles	200 times.
Salomy Jane	Paul Armstrong	The Liebler	Miss Eleanor Robson	19 weeks.
The Road to Yesterday	Dix and Sutherland	Shuberts	Miss Minnie Dupree	16 weeks.
The Rose of the Rancho	Belasco and Tully	Belasco	Miss Frances Starr	21 weeks.
The Man of the Hour	George H. Broadhurst	W. A. Brady	George Fawcett	200 times.
Caught in the Rain	Collier and Stewart	Charles Frohman	William Collier	150 times.

The American Dramatist in the Lead on the American Stage